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ABSTRACT

Approximately 5,000 works by Native artists across North America were examined to identify images that appeared to contain elements of humor. Several distinctive categories of humor in Native art were revealed: (1) whimsy (a sense of sheer fun or spontaneous amusement); (2) satire, ranging from gentle teasing to biting ridicule; (3) themes involving tricksters or fools; and (4) parody, which may be used to expose racial bias or insensitivity. In indigenous Arctic societies, climatic conditions are harsh, and humor makes life more bearable and eventful. Examples are given of whimsical humor in works by Arctic artists. Examples of satirical humor draw on chance connections across languages and cultures, poke fun at anthropologists, and use dark humor to illuminate painful incidents in Native history. Examples of narrative trickery and foolery include portrayals of Raven in Northwest Coast art and of the endlessly adaptable Coyote in the U.S. Southwest. Parody is used in examples of performance art to deal with cultural and racial stereotypes. Further research may focus on the cultural and social aspects of Native art styles. Humor is an effective means for marginalized groups to educate others, raising awareness of their perspectives on important issues via memorable and persuasive artwork. Art is vital to multicultural education, and humorous art can help students to enjoy and understand cultures different from their own. (Contains 22 references.) (SV)

Humour and Cultural Perspectives

Bill Zuk and Robert Dalton

This study examines visual humour by Native artists in North America. It analyses the role of humour in social life, and the content, style, and methods used by aboriginal artists. A classification system is used to identify certain kinds of humour and to raise questions for further study.

Introduction

Why study humour and what can be learned about a culture from a study of humour? It is complex and difficult to define but is often described as something comical or amusing. Humour is an important social device for enjoying and relating to others, it acts as a way of gaining and sustaining attention, making ideas memorable and engaging them emotionally. It is also a way of entering into sensitive cultural topics and dealing with difficult social issues. Its manifestations should be of concern to anyone seeking to understand cultural perspectives or differences. We undertook this enjoyable research because it has received little scholarly attention. Moreover, it was a way of gaining insight into how Native people view life, themselves and their relationship with others.

Our task began by examining approximately 5000 artworks created by North American Native artists and then isolating images that appeared to contain elements of humour. Before including them as examples of humour, however, we found supporting evidence in the form of artist statements or information from authors who had interviewed the artists. Our method of dealing with the data included reviewing written descriptions made by artists about their work and using a content analysis to determine special qualities and categories of humour. Our intention was to represent major geographic areas of North America. There are many nations within each area but cultures within a similar region tend to have similar cultural characteristics. The scope of our research extended from the Canadian Arctic (Inuit), Alaska (Eskimo), western Canada (Cree), central and eastern Canada (Ojibway), to the southwestern United States (Pueblo and Lusieno). Tribal groups or nations representing each region are identified in brackets. These are the cultures from which specific examples of humorous art have been drawn.

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Research Questions

In addressing issues of humour and the ideas of North American Native artists, a number of questions should be asked: (a) What is the role of humour in a particular culture? (b) How do artists use humour to communicate with members of their own culture and with outsiders? and (c) Are there stylistic features, formats, or media that characterize certain kinds of humour in Native art?

Categories of Humour

Visual humour is often complex and can take many forms. It is essential, therefore, to discover certain organizing principles. Initially we used Roukes' (1997) categories of visual humour as a framework, though we relied upon the data to redefine or suggest new categories. Our research revealed several distinctive categories of humour in North American Native art:

1. Whimsy can be defined as ideas related to a sense of sheer fun, amusement or enjoyment, fancifully or spontaneously derived. Allan (1967) discusses why Stephen Leacock was so effective as a writer of humour, suggesting that he saw fun in all kinds of situations and his humour seemed entirely natural and uncontrived. Sometimes whimsy is described as a less sophisticated form of humour because it seems to be natural, spontaneous and to have no other purpose than pleasure.
2. Satire may be gentle teasing or poking fun, but it can sometimes be cutting, abrasive, ridiculing or biting. Heller and Anderson (1991) comment that graphic humour, at its best, will force a laugh or a smile and also shock. They further suggest that satirical humour can be a mnemonic device involving wordplay. This may involve a playful alteration of slogans or the use of words that sound alike but have different meanings, in such a way as to play on two or more of the possible applications. The use of verbal puns as text with an artwork often simplifies complex concepts and enhances the meaning of a visual idea.
3. Narrative trickery or foolery makes use of storytelling qualities that involve characters noted for cunning, playing jokes, or improvising a comic role. Storytelling evolved in many Native cultures from the need to understand and explain the forces of nature and how people could live in harmony with the Earth and its creatures. These stories deal with important events in tribal, clan or family history, with supernatural forces, relationships between human and mythological beings, and with adventures. The important function of the story is to pass on "the knowledge of traditions, morals and mores from the old to the young, maintain social cohesion and continuity, and keep the culture alive and flourishing (Beck, 1991, p. ix). While narra-

tives involving tricksters, fools and clowns often have a strong entertainment value, they also contain lessons for living and provide spiritual guidance.

4. Parody includes mimicking, spoofing; comic representation or references to human behavior, beliefs, customs, conventions, or creations. While parallels exist between satire and parody in visual art, parody is sometimes associated with performance art. Performance artists dramatize cultural stereotypes by lampooning or "roasting" those who hold such views. Some Native artists uses parody to expose insensitivity and racial bias.

Responding to the Questions

In the selected examples of artwork that follow, a content analysis provides insight to the importance that humour assumes in particular cultures, how it is communicated, and the style and presentation that characterizes certain kinds of humour.

Whimsical Humour and Arctic Cultures

In small-scale indigenous Arctic societies, climatic conditions are harsh and continually test the will and ability of people to survive. Humour is an essential ingredient, making life more bearable and eventful. In families and community groups it is not uncommon to hear peals of laughter ring out at the smallest incident or provocation. Often the humour is raw and earthy, and on occasion it finds its way into drawings, prints, and sculptures.

At the opening of a circumpolar art exhibition in Alaska (Ingram, 1993; Steinbright and Atuk-Derrick, 1993), Native artist Alvin Amason created a brightly coloured papier mâché walrus head called "Ooh-ah, ooh-ah, ooh-ah." A spray of feathers adhered to thin rods push out of the nostrils of the walrus, representing life-giving breath and a sense of celebration. Other whimsical examples can be found in carvings depicting animals dancing and engaging in other playful human behaviors (Swinton, 1965; 1972). Another amusing example of celebration in a stonecut print by Cape Dorset artist Pootoogook (National Museum of Man, 1977), reveals the delight of the hunter displaying outstretched fingers radiating from the side of his head. The print is called "Joyfully I see ten caribou." Tudlik's stencil print (Canadian National Film Board, nd.) "Excited man forgets his weapon," describes a humorous hunting scene in which the hunter forgets his gun and pursues a polar bear with a hand extended toward the animal in a revolver-like fashion.

In Simon Tookoome's print (National Museum of Man, 1977), a funny event is recorded, that of tripping and falling. Titled "An embarrassing

tumble," it shows multiple faces on the arms of a figure seated on the ground. The multiple faces may represent villagers gathering to view the incident and share in the mirth and indignity of the situation. A particularly delightful example of whimsy in Inuit artwork is a recent stonecut print (Figure 1) by Kakulu Saggiaktok (1998) from the Cape Dorset Fine Arts Collection. "Kettle" depicts a utensil commonly found in Inuit households. Everything about this teakettle is uncommon however, a stubby double-headed bird with three beaks forms the lid of the vessel while the spout is constructed from the long neck and head of another bird. To further enhance the whimsical quality of the print, two fish swim inside the container as if it were an aquarium or perhaps a lake. Roukes (1997) would call this presentation "artful absurdity" because it exploits the creative potential of contradiction and displaced logic. Zuk and Dalton (1997) would suggest that the artist has used image development strategies in imaginative ways to press our "humour buttons."



Figure 1 Kettle, by Kakulu Saggiaktok

At first glance, the playfulness of Saggiaktok's "Kettle" print may be likened to a print by Sheouak (National Museum of Man, 1977). "The pot spirits" depicts several anthropomorphized utensils dancing or running across the picture plane. However, the title of the print suggests a connection with animism, the attribution of conscious life to nature or natural objects. What initially appears to be whimsical may not be at all. Further consultation with the artist is required to make a reliable determination about the meaning of the work and whether or not humour was intended. Caution and cultural sensitivity is required so that we will learn to recognize humour and laugh with the artist.

Satirical Humour Related to Language and Culture

Language and culture sometimes influence one another. Bob Boyer's painting of a bottle cap (Campbell, 1985), contains the Lakota greeting

"How cola" meaning "hello my friend." In his painting, Boyer has presented the words in a similar format to the Pepsi-Cola logo. This teasing and double meaning of greetings associated with popular culture artifacts indicates how visual artists can create humour by extending chance connections between two languages and cultures.

The images of Gerald McMaster (Ryan, 1991) poke fun in subtle and sometimes sarcastic ways to remind us about the experiences of Native people in both Canada and the United States. One artwork called "Custer's hat size" makes reference to General Custer's inflated ego through an enormously wide brimmed hat. McMaster contends that Americans distance themselves from the General, not because he was wrong but because he lost the battle. Custer was part of a dark chapter in American history and part of a system that attempted to annihilate Native people in the United States. In another painting (Figure 2) McMaster depicts former Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald as a joker (referring to Batman and the Joker) with a printed message in the background "Trick or treaty," a reference to land rights. Clearly, the artwork urges us to explore another version of history.



Figure 2 Trick or treaty, by Gerald McMaster

Also reminding us that there is more than one historical point of view, Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau (Sinclair and Pollock, 1979) pokes fun at anthropology. Many anthropologists hold the view that Native people came to North America across a land bridge in the Bering Strait, but the Ojibway people believe they have always been here. Morrisseau uses visual satire in his painting to show Ojibway warriors paddling a big canoe heading for North America. In a second painting, a biting form of dark humour is used by Morrisseau. In "The gift," the white

man shakes the hand of the Indian in friendship and as he does so, confers upon him the gift of smallpox. Throughout North America, large populations of Native people were decimated by smallpox and other diseases introduced by explorers, traders, and settlers. If the title of Morrisseau's work is an indication of meaning, this is a humorous but painful historical reminder of that fact.

Narrative Trickery and Foolery.

The characters of aboriginal folklore guide and inspire their listeners, helping them develop strength of character and wisdom. In the Northwest Coast cultures of British Columbia, the Raven was one of the most important creatures. He was a cultural hero, daring and cunning, the trickster, the Big Man who created the world (Stewart, 1979). He put the sun, moon and stars in the sky, fish into the sea, salmon into their rivers, and food onto the land. Though his actions were often



Figure 3 Raven stealing the sun, by Ken Mowatt

motivated by selfishness and greed, there was often humour in the way he teased, cheated, wooed, and tricked his victims. Today, carvers, jewellers, painters, and printmakers portray Raven more often and in more ways than any other mythological creature. Ken Mowatt, a Tsimshian artist shows Raven stealing the sun (Segger, Dalton, and Zuk, 1998). The bird (Figure 3) is distinguished by a long beak with a blunt, slightly curved tip. A perfectly round sun in the form of a round face sits in the partially open beak, a reminder of the bird's heroics.

Tricksters and fools can also be found in other cultures. Among the Native people of the Southwestern United States, the coyote is often depicted as a foolish, laughable animal. In one portrayal (Archuleta and Strickland, 1991), Harry Fonseca, a Pueblo artist makes fun of himself in a self-portrait called "When coyote leaves the reservation." Strickland (1986) notes that Fonseca's portrayal of the coyote is highly adaptable:

Fonseca's Coyote appears in many wonderful guises: city Coyote, and mod Coyote. In recent years, Coyote has become more at home at the pueblo and in tribal ceremonies like the ones depicted here. As Fonseca creates more and more characters, and their personalities develop, a whole new mythology of modern Indian life unfolds. The old ways and old stories, in all their richness, once more provide a way to understand the new. The Fonseca Coyotes, consistent with traditional legends, are clever folk who both outsmart and are tricked by their environment (p. 268).

In another work entitled "Rose and the res sisters," (Figure 4), Strickland further explains Fonseca's use of Coyote:



Figure 4 Rose and the res sisters, by Harry Fonseca

The most popular and widely known of Fonseca's work is his series on Coyote characters, of which Rose is the heroine. Fonseca has been strongly influenced by the mainstream funk image and has used it to unite the Indian and the modern white world. Coyote grins, snickers, sings, dances, and cavorts in a world made suddenly absurd by his presence. In Indian mythology, Coyote is the universal trickster, armed with the cutting tongue of a fool, who becomes the mirror reflecting the world's follies (p. 284).

Parody and Performance

James Luna, a Lusieno Native from La Jolla, California is a master of spoof and mime. He uses performance art to deal with personal history and cultural stereotypes. In one installation called "The artifact piece" (Reid, 1991), a showcase in a museum setting was the focus for his presentation. Luna climbed into the horizontal case, stretched in a

prone position and lay still while visitors viewed him as a museum artifact and tourist attraction. In another work "The sacred colours are everywhere" (Longman, 1997), Luna used parody to expose our beliefs about race. He participated in a group photograph representing the colour red (as in "Red Indian"), among other colours: white (European), black (African) and yellow (Asian). Luna's performances challenge our views about cultural and racial stereotypes.

Further Research and Educational Implications

This study lays a foundation for further research. It has enabled us to suggest categories of humour, ones that come from the literature and also seem to emerge from the data. As with any structures, these categories will reveal and obscure. They help to identify forms of visual humour and their purpose or meaning, but they may also make it more difficult to identify forms that lie outside or between categories. The structure serves an important purpose in helping us frame questions for further research. For example, why was it so easy to find examples of whimsy from Inuit artists and perhaps more difficult to find whimsy in the artwork of Northwest Coast artists? Does the answer lie in traditional differences between their cultures or does the highly formalized design style of Northwest Coast Native art resist the more fanciful, spontaneous aspects of whimsy? And why did our search for visual humour in artworks from the central and eastern Woodlands cultures reveal so many examples where satire was used? Does this have something to do with the nature and extent of their contact with the dominant culture or does the answer lie in their artistic traditions? Many of the artists whose work we've reviewed have formal training in contemporary Western art. Their work is created for exhibition and sale in museums and galleries beyond their traditional communities. This means that the artists are aware of their audience and this may affect their choice of subject matter and how it is presented. Are there differences between the humour in art meant for a wider audience and humour intended just for members of their own culture? We expect there is but this requires further research that relies on interviews.

Humour has an important role to play in social life and it is especially important as a means of coping with the stress of difficult experiences. Humour can also be an effective means for marginalized groups to educate others, raising awareness of their perspectives on important issues. Visual humour "sugar coats the pill," giving viewers greater incentive to be attentive and consider the point of view of the artist. The aesthetic nature of the artwork and the skilful development of the composition also help to make the artwork memorable and persuasive. This is the power of art and why it is so vital to multicultural education. Through

a study of humour and cultural perspectives, students can come to understand, respect, and enjoy cultures different from their own and in the process, gain a better understanding of themselves and their own culture.

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